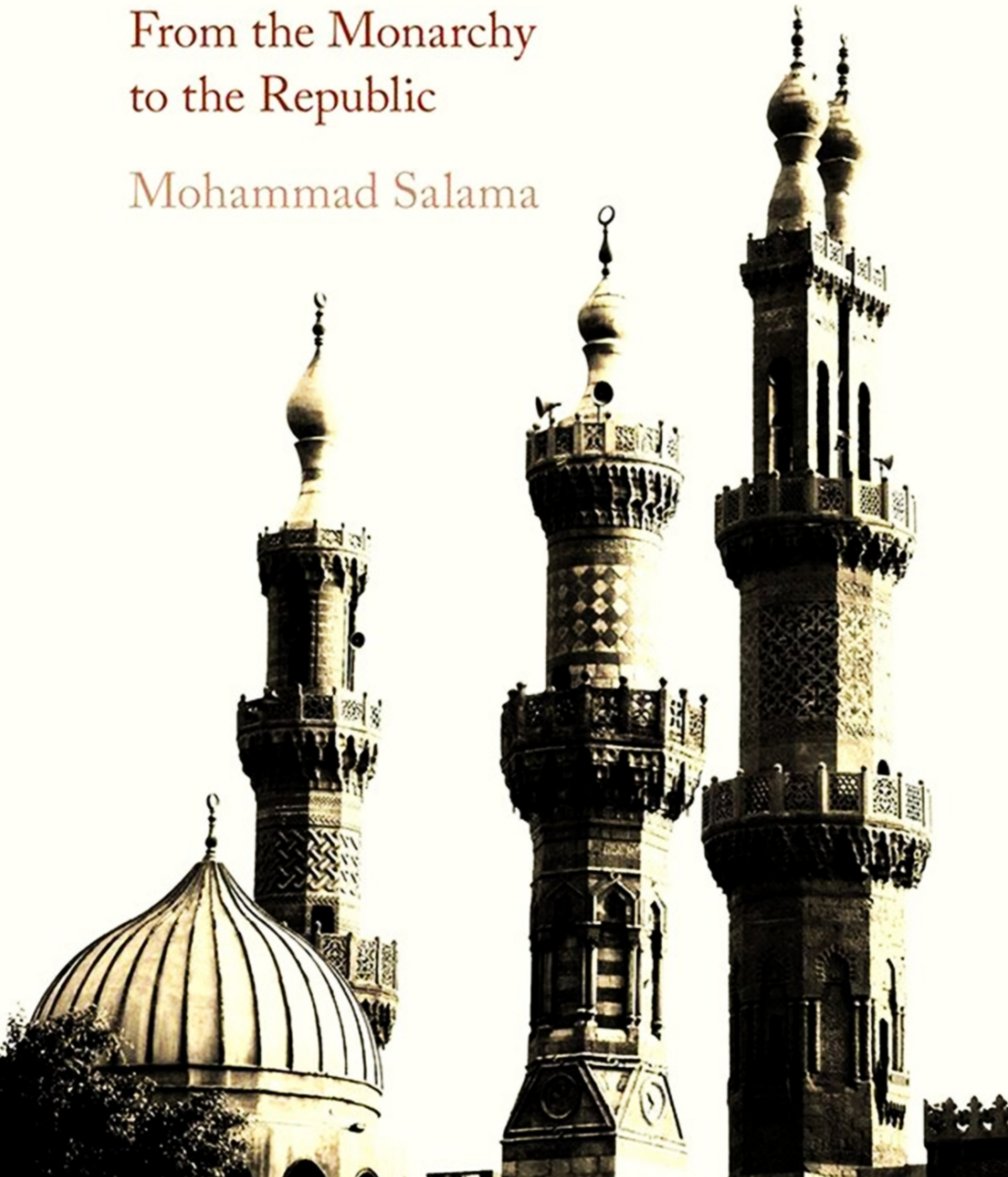
Islam and the Culture of Modern Egypt

From the Monarchy to the Republic

Mohammad Salama



Islam and the Culture of Modern Egypt

Telling a new story of modern Egypt, Mohammad Salama uses literary and cinematic sources to construct a clear and accessible narrative of the dynamics of Islam and culture in the first half of the twentieth century. The conflict between tradition and secular values in modern Egypt is shown in a stimulating and challenging new light as Salama bridges analysis of nationalism and its connection to Islamism and outlines the effects of secular education versus traditional Islamic teaching on varied elements of Egyptian society. These include cultural production, politics, identity, and gender relations. All of this helps to discern the harbingers that led to Egypt's social transition from the monarchy to the republic, and opens the possibility of Islam as an inspiring and inspirational force. This illuminating, provocative, and informative study will be of inestimable value to anyone interested in the period, whether general readers, students, or researchers.

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To my children, Salma, Malachi, Aliya, Noah; my siblings, Nasser, Ahmad, Kareem, Amani; my parents, Aziza and Ramadan; and in memory of John McGuire – what I have learned from John cannot be quantified.

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A Note on Transliteration and Translation

This book follows a specialized diacritical system for Arabic for all scholarly purposes. I use the standard Western spelling of terms that have entered the English language like "Arab," "Islam," and country names. I use the standard Library of Congress transliteration system for all other Arabic terms, with a few exceptions. In Arabic words such as 'Ā'isha, the (') symbolizes the Arabic letter (ع) ['ayn], while the (') symbolizes the glottal Arabic (ئ ؤ إ أ ء) [hamza]. An accented (á) symbolizes the alif maqṣūra (ى) at the end of an Arabic word, as in (على) 'alá.

The definitive (ال) is fully transcribed as (Al-/al-) regardless of whether the following letters are ḥurūf shamsiyya or ḥurūf qamariyya. In genitive iḍāfa constructions, the pronounced (ة) is transcribed as a -t- between two nouns, or as part of the full word, as in Jumhūriyya-t- Faraḥāt or Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt. Full case endings are added to Qur'ānic and poetic quotations only. When a full case ending is necessary, in cases of tanwīn تَنْوِين or nunation, the sign (-un) indicating the nominative case, (-an) indicating the accusative case, and (-in) indicating the genitive case are all superscripted.

Dagger alif (أَلِف خَنْجَرِيَّة) [alif khanjarīyya], which is also known as symbolic alif, small alif, superscript alif, or historical alif, and which appears in Arabic script as a short vertical stroke on top of a consonant, is symbolized as a long /ā/ sound. For example: (هٰذَا) [hādhā] or (رَحْمٰن) [raḥmān]. The (ه) at the end of a transcribed Arabic word like the possessive pronoun in كتابه [his book] refers to Arabic words ending in an (h) (ه) and not with a (ة), as commonly practiced. The final (ة) is not transcribed, as in كتابة [kitāba].

Unless otherwise noted in the text or notes, all translations from Arabic and French are my own.

Preface

During the Second World War, in the summer of 1943 to be exact, a young orphan migrated north from *Ḥawḍ ʻAshara* (District 10) in the Upper Egyptian city of *Qinā* to settle in the metropolis known among Egyptians as *ʻRūs al-Baḥr al-Mutwassiṭ* (The Bride of the Mediterranean Sea). At this time, Alexandria was the most popular destination for Upper Egyptians seeking cooler weather and a more prosperous livelihood in northern Egypt. This particular man's elder brother had established himself five years earlier as a caretaker for a well-to-do family in the area of Rushdie Pasha. Fortunately, the landowning wealthy family was now seeking a nighttime guard for the house, with full board and a small stipend. They hired the younger brother for the position. To an illiterate Upper Egyptian peasant in the Farūq years, this was a golden opportunity for economic self-improvement. Soon enough, the young man moved into the small two-bedroom apartment located in the lower eastern corner of the villa's basement. To supplement his income, he was also able to find a part-time commuting job as a machine operator at the Sibahi Spinning and Weaving Company on the outskirts of Alexandria. That young man was my future father.

Twenty-two years earlier, a similar story took place when a man from the same *ṣaʼīd* (Upper Egyptian) neighborhood in *Qinā* migrated to Alexandria to work for the British-owned Shell Oil Company. He soon married a young woman from Damanhūr and had three children with her before she died at a young age. The youngest of the three orphaned siblings was my mother, who married my father through the *Khātiba* (matchmaker) tradition of conservative *ṣa ʻīdī* families living in Alexandria. My mother and father were thus brought together by the ambitions of migrant working classes who elbowed their way through the economics and politics of a fading British Empire, a feeble monarchy, and a rising nationalism. It was in the summer of 1965 that

my parents got married and my mother moved to live with my father in his caretaker apartment in the Rushdie villa.

Such an encounter could have happened in Alexandria or elsewhere in Metropolitan Egypt. There is, however, an important rationale for beginning my book with this glance backwards into my own prehistory. We all strive to make sense of the past as a generalized record of history open to everyone's reflections and analyses, but any such record will inevitably be colored by personal recollections. And just as with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's autobiography, *al-Ayyām* (*The Days*), my recollections of the past stretch back beyond the point where my own childhood memories begin. For me, born as I was in the shadow of European dominion in Egypt, to a father and a mother who were toddlers in the aftermath of Ḥasan al-Bannā's establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood and adolescents when the Free Officers carried out their coup on July 23, 1952, the regime of Nasser, with which I conclude this study, falls within my own extended familial autobiography. As such, my account of this regime bears the marks of my parents' experience of the culture of modern Egypt at a period that preceded my birth, the outset of the twentieth century. And just as it reflects my preconscious experience of the Nasser years, it reflects, as well, the marks of my direct exposure to the years that have followed.

Nasser died on September 28, 1970, leaving behind him a gap and a memory. The Arabic word for memory is *dhikrà*, which derives from the three-letter root *dh. k. r.* In addition to its connection to memory and remembering, *dh. k. r.* also means to "mention." The root connects the word memory, *dhikrà*, to an enunciation in the present (the now), thus making memory an act of the present. I carry those memories with me wherever I go, as a stamp of my identity, as I strive to make sense of the past and seek solace in a somewhat blurred narrative that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that I call my life. Yet, I am equally aware that remembering, an arduous task of keeping one's own identity intact, will never be fully achieved in the present, but will always remain a unique and unverifiable work in progress.

As an act of *dhikrà*, this book is a memory, not only of the past and of my own interactions with, and readings of, all those narratives on Islam and the culture of modern Egypt; it is also a memory of the future, rooted in the past, yet signaling what is yet to come of Egypt, a memory that has been expressed by many authors in this study,

from Haykal's romantic love to Idrīs's satirical utopia, from Mahfouz's nihilism to Chahine's nationalism, from Qutb and Bākāthīr's Islamism to al-Ḥakīm and Ḥusayn's humanism. Memory is not just about failed revolutions, the years of deprivation, the ugly reality of village medicine, or the oppression of religious institutions, although all these are important. Memory is life, embodied in the fears and aspirations of individuals in living societies, subject to the dialectic of utopia and despair, of dreams and reality, of remembering and forgetting. Memory, as the Arabic origin denotes, is a bond between the past and the present, an invocation of a lived past that thrives on vague reminiscences and hazy impressions; its rootedness in the concrete, an image, a landscape, a sweet voice, a flavor, a gesture, an object, a photo, a materiality beaten by time, hazily recorded and locked up in a mental safe, allowing us to situate the personal in a sacred assertion of, or search for, our own identities. Amidst all this haziness, Nasser occupies a similarly nebulous place in the collective memory of my generation.

Many recollections of Nasser have been eclectic and dismissive. Many historical works dwell on the famous events in Nasser's regime. Events such as the 1952 coup, the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the Agrarian Reform Law, and the wars with Europe and Israel, as well as the relationship with the Arab world and Russia, all become the focus of those histories concerned with taking these events apart to show how they functioned and how they came about. But most of those writings raise many questions about biases and interpretations, and sometimes even give profundity to a past devoid of it. Take, for example, Bernard Lewis's perspective on Nasser in his book, *The Middle East and the West*. In 1955, Bernard Lewis speaks of the "mood and wish that united many if not most Arabs" in their desire to "spite and humiliate the West." According to Lewis, the "most dramatic and satisfying expression" of this attitude was found in "Nasser's Russian arms deal in Egypt in September 1955. In the twilight world of popular myths and images, the West is the source of all evil."[1] The Nasser of Bernard Lewis's twilight zone is the antagonist of a monolithic West.

I am sure Nasser is remembered differently by his family, children, and grandchildren. Even in my own family, my father would have

[1] Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (London: HarperCollins College Division, 1968), 20.

begged to differ with Bernard Lewis. The word "Nasser" was very important to him. Nasser is the name he chose to give to my elder brother, his first son, after which my father was always called *Abū Nāṣir* (father of Nasser) and my mother *Umm Nāṣir* (mother of Nasser). To have such popular *kunya* (a teknonymy or a practice of referring to parents by the names of their first born) as the same name of an Upper Egyptian Alexandria-born President is a glory that speaks for itself. My siblings and I grew up singing nationalist songs and listening to tapes by popular singers like Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Um Kulthūm, and 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ. Ours was a radio household in a radio republic. Nationalism was fed to us, both consciously and unconsciously, by the speeches that our father would make us sit down and listen to, even if we did not understand a word or cared to, and by the rampant drums of militarism that penetrated our ears on a daily basis, as we went to school, while we lunched on the delicious falafel sandwiches of *Abū Rabī'* at Isis (Izīs/Buklà/Bolkoley) Tram Station, or when we went for a swim at Rushdie and Stanley Beaches.

I recall one of the earliest childhood memories of a photo of my father in his youth in front of his machine in the Sibahi Spinning and Weaving Factory in Kafr al-Dawwār, a suburb of Alexandria. It was a black and white shot, with my father smiling in the middle left corner of the frame, though not looking directly at the camera, while keeping busy with his hands on that huge machine that engulfed the remaining two-thirds of the photo. He looked so happy, yet too young, I later thought, to be operating such an enormous machine. I grew up with this photo magnifying my father's heroism in my eyes, though I often wondered why it would take him so long to go to work and come back, and how, with little or no education, he was able to do his daily *wardiyya* (shift) on this colossal nonstopping leviathan. It was much later, and after he got a more stable job at the Alexandria Transportation Company, that I came to learn that precoup textile managements intentionally located their factories far from major urban centers to better control their workforces, and that they intentionally and selectively recruited illiterate, unskilled Egyptians with no prior experience of industrial life so that they might not ask for salary increases or work-related accident compensation, or organize to improve their working conditions.

My father was lucky; he worked at the Sibahi Spinning and Weaving Company at the right time in Egypt's modern history, when

Nasser's regime cleverly restored the dignity of Egyptian peasants and factory workers while simultaneously dismantling all labor unions and labeling union organizers as communist ideologues punishable by the law. Nasser's regime thus managed to orient the workers' movements towards nationalist issues and to dissolve them in the newly forming Egyptian collective. Nationally, the regime's support for the working class was a very successful move. This, of course, was consolidated by Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal and the regime's emphasis on expanding modern industry. In turn, the working class grew in size and gained political legitimacy and status, but lost their unions, and with them the right to justice and legal representation. My father's employment as *'āmil mākīna* (a machine operator) in a spinning and weaving factory owned by a *mutamaṣṣir* (Egyptianized) redefined Egyptian nationalism. An Egyptian peasant in a cotton-related business, his status as a symbol of the new, hard-working, Egyptian native was somehow linked to the historical meta-narrative of Egypt's anti-colonial struggle, and to the fact that from 1882 to 1952, Egypt was subject to British colonial domination. During those times, nearly all of the large-scale employers were foreigners enjoying economic power that was enhanced and safeguarded by the monarchy, which in turn protected Britain's interests in Egypt. My father's status was perceived as part of the country's fight for self-determination and he, as a worker, was perceived as the dispossessed, native peasant coming back to reclaim his usurped rights.

This motif of the dispossessed peasant – whatever ideology it serves – is at the center of Egypt's colonial and postcolonial self-definition. It is easy to see it as a common thread throughout this book, passing from Ḥaqqī's *Virgin of Denshawai* (1906), to Haykal's *Zaynab* (1914), to Ḥusayn's *The Days* (1927), to Bākāthīr's *The Red Revolutionary* (1949), and to other works not addressed in this study, all the way up to Chahine's *Gamīla* (1958). I do not take credit for noting this: there is a peasant in every Egyptian story. However, it took me decades to connect the dots and to see the multi-gowned peasant clothed, by turn, in injustice, inequity, negligence, enslavement, fundamentalism, Islamism, nationalism, and Egyptianism as the decades went by. My father, the migrant peasant of Upper Egypt, unequipped with any kind of certificate or skill other than farming, or for that matter with anything that would make for a decent life in Metropolitan Egypt, found opportunity once he made the decision to

leave the neglected south and board *wabūr al-sā ʿa ithnā ʿashar* (the twelve o'clock locomotive), the overnight train that runs between Aswān and Alexandria.

My father's Islam has its beginning in Upper Egypt, Sufism of a deeply stoic nature, occasional *dhikr* nights (focused collective prayers in praise of God), daily prayers, Friday *khuṭba* (sermon), *zakā* (charity), fasting in the month of Ramadan, listening to *Idhā ʿa-t-al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (a national radio station broadcasting the Holy Qur'ān), and praying for a miracle to be able to afford *Ḥajj* (pilgrimage). Speaking of miracles, when I first read Ḥusayn's autobiography, *The Days*, in high school, I was struck by a familiar parental attitude towards the idea of Providence. The young boy's father asked him to recite the Yāsīn chapter repeatedly with the expectation or hope that God would not turn down the appeals of a blind lad reciting the Qur'ān. My father, too, prayed insistently and continually appealed for economic improvement in the form of a financial gift from God, literally a "bag of money." My father promised God, in his earnest yet simple prayers, that if He were to grant him a gift, he would use the money to build a mosque nearby for people to pray in. Anyone who has been to Alexandria or other parts of Egypt, even briefly, will not fail to see that our neighborhood, in fact the whole of Egypt, did not need any more mosques. But that was my father's pledge, a contractual hope for an act of divine generosity to be reciprocated with an act of human gratitude.

This culture of appeal and supplication is indeed the ethos of many Egyptian Muslims, including appeals for career advancement, marriage, safety, success at school, and cure from illnesses. Egypt's archenemies are poverty and disease. These have not changed, no matter the place, the cultural formations, the religious affiliations, or the political leanings. Of course, every generation is shaped by different cultural forces. I got onto the train of postcolonial Egypt at a different stop than my father did. I had my own expectations of what the destination would be, having missed the rough transition from monarchy to republic, which for my parents and their generation must have been the most crucial cultural turn in Egypt's modern history.

That is what I mean in this book by the *relationship* between Islam and the culture of modern Egypt. Islam in modern Egypt is a multitude – in other words, not exactly the fundamentalist hardline of the Muslim Brotherhood or even the more militant *al-Jamā*

'a al-Islāmiyya, whose members assassinated President Sadat in 1980, but rather the varied forms of cultural practices at home, greeting people, stepping into the mosque with the right foot, TV *adhān* reminders (calls for prayers), Friday exhortations, and the two Eids. The practice of Islam is more like a sanctuary from the mundane, a reminder that God will reward the good and punish evil. God is the poverty antidote, the spiritual recharge to cope with life in a police state of class privileges. My father knew very well that there are different ways of understanding Islam and the world. Shrouding Egypt and the whole world in a Quṭbian cloak of Islamism was simply detestable and unthinkable for him. Understandably enough, his 'basic' perspective on and practice of Islam seemed to be well-suited for Nasser's Egypt, which was intolerant of religious fundamentalism, less concerned with intellectual or social movements, and definitely dismissive of any principles of shared governance.

It took me decades to be able to discern how the ebbs and flows of the labor movement in Nasser's Egypt coincided with the successive upsurges of the nationalist movement. The participation of the working class in the nationalist cause, which my father represented, infused the movement for full independence and evacuation of British military forces with a radical social consciousness. Workers' strikes and demonstrations, including that of the Muslim Brotherhood – which, ironically enough, started *as* a social union – were usually directed against foreign enterprises. The labor movement was often considered to be one component in a larger nationalist movement. After 1956, Nasser's foreign policy shifted towards *al-Ḥiyād al-Ījābī* (Positive Neutralism) and *al-Tasalluḥ Ḍidd al-Isti'mār* (Militant Anti-imperialism). The tripartite attack of 1956 served to confirm for a nationalistically indoctrinated Egyptian public that the main political question of the day was still the struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism, now augmented by the Muslim Brotherhood's failed plot to take over Egypt in 1954 and Israel's external threats after 1948 and beyond.

These issues, rather than the economy and internal class struggle, dominated Nasser's politics. There was no interest in addressing Egypt's most immediate and urgent challenges: poverty, disease, illiteracy, and dictatorship. Nor was there concern with the question of the degree to which republicanism (Egyptian republicanism that is, which Idrīs ridicules in *Farāḥāt's Republic*) and democracy can be

reconciled, and with the question of whether new structures of governance can be created through legal-bureaucratic means. If the question of Egypt's democracy began with Nasser, it also ended there, and my memory of it during Sadat and Mubarak's regimes became a memory of a distant and uncertain future.

From the very beginning, the nationalist state was too narrow a framework to adequately guarantee successful economic policies and to protect Egypt against external factors – against the imperatives of the world market and the growing economic control of the United States. The development of a nation-state culture has arrived at an impasse, a horrifying realization that, of all the works discussed in this study, only Idrīs's novella is able to articulate, as early as 1956. Much was not known of Nasser's regime except through what the media granted Egyptians access to. During the Sadat years, Nasser was still referred to as *al-Rayyis* (the Leader), *Baṭal al-Thawra* (The Hero of the Revolution), but Sadat soon came to assume his new position as *baṭal al-Ḥarb wa al-Salām* (The Hero of War and Peace) and also *al-Rayyis* (the Leader). Mubarak, too, got the label of heroism, *al-Baṭal al-Qā'id* (The Leading Hero). Every new "hero" diminishes the others; in the Mubarak years, Sadat was reduced to *ṣāhib qarār al-ḥarb* (the one who made the decision to go to war [against Israel]), while Nasser was only left his bare name, sans privileges, *Nasser* – a name often uttered among Egypt's working class fellows with a sad, nostalgic sigh.

One must give credit where credit is due. Nasser's regime provided free education for all Egyptians. My mother was able to send me to public school because of Nasser. Without Nasser, I would not have been able to afford an education. Nasser's advent was thus populist as much as it was anti-monarchic and anti-Islamist, a major shift in Egypt's modern political and cultural history. It gave hope for at least the idea of a new Egypt. And this new Egypt, this particular revolutionary Egypt, would represent the only political culture that would resist the monarchy; that is, resist the royal and imperially planted rule of a sole dynasty, and take a stand in the face of subordination and authoritarianism.

There are two main reasons why the promise of the welfare republic could not hold. The first lies in the understanding of what democracy means, a question that risks disrupting the legacy and the promise of the word "democracy" from Nasser to el-Sisi. The second

reason is that this democracy, or the memory of Nasser's promise of democracy, inherited by Sadat, Mubarak, Morsi (the short-tenured and currently imprisoned Islamist President), and now el-Sisi, became the refrain of presidential speeches, the speech of utopia, the irony of all ironies, uttered and celebrated by dictatorial leaders violating it and ridiculing its very meaning.

All that was needed, the Egyptian intelligentsia agreed, was stability – good, persistent stability – because our country could not afford to continue to live in poverty and constant revolutions and wars. The intelligentsia had conflicting visions of the Egyptian *fallāḥ* (peasant) and which path was the best to follow to achieve this stability. Would Egypt be better off with a return to the premodern stability of Islam? Had this stability ever existed, or had it always been only a utopia of things past? Or was it yet to be found in a modern form of Islam? If so, what would that be? Or should Egypt be secular, European, trans-Islamic? The irony is that all, including Nasser, Quṭb, Ḥusayn, and Bākāthīr, wanted an Egypt that could address the central need for welfare and stability, post-colonization, and post-Revolution. But that crucial need for *istiqrār* (stability), has in the process of realizing itself, destroyed itself, precisely by getting carried away with itself, leaving behind it a history, or rather a memory, of a series of thwarted revolutions and of straw-man heroes who squandered the aspirations for democracy on the long path toward it.

Introduction
Prelude, Considerations, and Definitions

Reading literature, we learn to learn from the singular and the unverifiable.

Gayatri Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason

Production of Violence: Reflections on an Un-mastered Past

A video of the twenty-six year-old Egyptian journalist Aḥmad Samīr ʻĀṣim's filming his own death in the aftermath of the June 30, 2013 event as the military was taking over the country is perhaps the most poignant symbol of the state of affairs in Egypt now.[1] The young man was filming the President's Republican Guards at close range while they were shooting down civilians, only to have the sniper on film realize what the young man was doing, turn the rifle onto him, and kill him on the spot. The blackness that ensued, the brief and haphazard mechanical rolling of the empty film that no longer has agency or the purpose to tilt over and show us the brave young man as he lies dead in a pool of his own blood, signifies the worst return of the same, or, if you will, the saddening descent of Egypt into a state of political chaos.

The death of Aḥmad Samīr ʻĀṣim as he was recording barbarism – like the death of many other innocent Egyptians protesting the abuses of their government – is a grim reminder that even if democracy has not yet found a stable ground on Egypt's soil, the rule of law still remains the only way out of the vacant darkness of authoritarianism. While incidents like these might make it easy for the "West" to

[1] See www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/video-shocking-footage-appears-to-capture-moment-egyptian-filmed-his-own-death-through-his-lens-8700519.html; www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/10170307/Ahmed-Assem-the-Egyptian-photographer-who-chronicled-his-own-death.html.

re-absorb the "Egyptian" narrative into the usual colonial and postcolonial pathos – the masses hungry for the "Western" fruit of "civilization" and liberal democracy undone by their own "Oriental" traits of violence, irrationality, authoritarianism – the "Other" continues to struggle to find a way out of these customary traps of representation.

The event is one among thousands of recorded cases of military brutality against Egyptian citizens; it is indeed a logical continuity of colonial violence followed immediately by postcolonial dictatorships. This alone makes writing about Egypt's modern history a source of pain. But if we were to put this current crisis in a larger context, we would see that education is the backbone of every civilized society and the foundation of civic discourse and democratic government. Just as water does not suddenly come to the boil, but reaching 100°C is rather the culmination of a gradual heating process, so too is an ongoing process of education necessary for building a democratic society. It takes decades, perhaps even centuries, to establish a sound and reliable educational base. One's indignation at the politics of the democratically elected Egyptian president and his gang of brothers was naively assuaged when hearing about his removal from office and the suspension of the country's cryptic Constitution, as well as the disbanding and criminalizing of the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization. But taking a more discursive and analytical look at the current affairs in Egypt puts us face-to-face with an agonizing dilemma. How can one choose between the imperative for reclaiming the Revolution and the need to avoid a return to violence – and at what cost?

The heating up of the Egyptian political scene, as currently witnessed, is a symptom of a fundamental failure in education. Harvard Law Professor Noah Feldman denounces the events of June 2013 in Egypt "as a tragic setback for democracy, constitutionalism and the rule of law."[2] Whether or not we agree with Feldman that Egypt has fallen into "the rule of the mob," what needs to be recorded historically is that such a fatal breakdown in the democratic process is not a sudden occurrence but, rather, the result of an accumulated neglect that began more than a century ago. While ruling Egypt for twenty-four years, Lord Cromer, the British commissioner and consul-general in Egypt

[2] See Noah Feldman, "Democracy Loses in Egypt and Beyond" in *Bloomberg Review*, July 3, 2013. www.bloombergview.com/articles/2013-07-03/democracy-loses-in-egypt-and-beyond.

(1883–1907), vehemently opposed the establishment of a university, claiming that educating the Egyptians would create a class of graduates for which no jobs could be found, and would thus generate a problem of unemployment. Of course, there is more to this willful neglect of education than meets the eye.

Both the killings of peasants by the British Army of Occupation in colonial Egypt and the killings of Egyptians by the military in the post-colonial era are shameful records of barbarism. While one was practiced one hundred years ago by a colonizer, and the second by army officers, one must never lose track of the larger context of which these two events are grave symbols. As happened in the Denshawai Affair of 1906 and Egypt's military coup of 2013, official histories tend to process events, "smoothing out" the textures of pain, loss, and struggle, especially when the mapping of the new imperial world system comes into play, when the colonizer has long left the colonies and labeled them "third world," and when the colonized "Other" has inherited the baton of violence and come to terrorize and recolonize its own. I have addressed the Denshawai affair in more details elsewhere, drawing attention to the invention of Islamophobia and equation of Islam with barbarism as a legitimizing tool for colonizing Egypt.[3]

It is therefore crucial, in historicizing the turning inward of Egypt's high culture, to pose a different set of questions: Why did Egypt's culture and its dominant religion of Islam attain such dazzling crudeness just when British soldiers, politicians, engineers, and archaeologists were scheming to put together their colonial project? For the context of this study, and to extend George Steiner's salient interrogations of history's material reality outside language,[4] are there certain types or styles of language that lend themselves readily to embody this "material reality" more than others? These two questions trigger a third: Why would the novel and film art, chiefly notable for preoccupation with the individual, become the mode of choice for writing about colonized populations – about slaves, the disenfranchised, peasants – and about the rigid dogmas and madness by which these wretched populations are oppressed?

[3] See Mohammad Salama, *Islam, Orientalism and Intellectual History: Modernity and the Politics of Exclusion since Ibn Khaldun* (London: IB Tauris, 2011).

[4] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.

In exploring these questions, it is important to emphasize that Egypt's heritage is not merely Islamic. The dictates of colonist and orientalist discourses have fashioned theories about the conflicts between civilizations. As a result of these essentialist theories, Islam came to be viewed as antithetical to, derivative of, or in complete denial of European influences on its cultures. A thorough history of this carefully constructed polarization between Islam and colonial modernity, and, more importantly, within a predominantly Muslim society like Egypt, is long overdue.

Take, for example, Britain's goal of creating a loyal middle class in Egypt without establishing a system of postsecondary education. Political and social institutions loosely modeled on metropolitan Britain were created in Alexandria and Cairo. The Egyptian elite were encouraged to participate in these institutions, although their design was inferior to the imperial models on which they were based. This participation, notes the political scientist Abdelslam Maghoraoui, "included defining the boundaries of the political community with the purpose of representing Egypt as the European masters wanted it to be represented: imitating Europe, but not quite European."[5] In other words, there is an inevitable and futile act of mimicry at work. "Like the Europeans who defined their 'self' against the non-European 'other,'" continues Maghoraoui, "Egyptian liberals defined their national identity in opposition to the Arabo-Islamic 'Other.' To construct a nation modeled after those in Europe, Egyptian liberals redefined the territorial, historical, racial, and cultural boundaries of the new Egyptian nation."[6] Significant writings produced in the early and mid-1920s, including 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq's *al-Khilāfa wa Niẓām al-Ḥukm* (*The Caliphate and the System of Government*) and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *Fī al-Shi'r al-Jāhilī* (*On Pre-Islamic Poetry*) fall within the period of Maghoraoui's study and seem to confirm his thesis by eschewing traditional Islam for the sake of a more secular and nationalist Egyptian identity. Of course, such works can easily be called political, not simply because they address political matters – e.g. when 'Abd al-Rāziq dismisses the *khilāfa* as a non-Islamic form of government, or when Ḥusayn changes the starting point for classical Arabic or Egyptian identity – but also because these works take sides in and leave memorable marks on the political

[5] Abdelslam M. Maghraoui, *Liberalism without Democracy: Nationhood and Citizenship in Egypt*, 1992–36 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 69.
[6] Ibid.

confrontations and happenings in which they intervene, thus inevitably becoming part of the political discourse.

And yet intervention in colonial discourses is a double-edged sword. Once in Egypt, Britain sought hegemony over the population through coercion and suppression. The last thing the colonizer needed was an educated class that not only understood its rights but also could organize to fight for the country's independence. Cromer knew this formula quite well, as the educated elite were already causing turmoil in Egypt as well as in India. He knew that the best thing Egyptians could do – for the sake of the British Empire – was to serve as workers and as a labor force in agriculture and industry, so he fashioned his imperial policy to serve that very purpose. In this context, Cromer succeeded in the creation of an Egyptian boom and bringing order to what had otherwise been a messy financial slump since the time of Ismā'īl.

One example of Cromer's "success" is found in enhancing the country's irrigation system and increasing the value of crops, especially cotton: he raised the crop from three million cantars in 1879 to eight million by 1907.[7] To administer an economically successful colony, Cromer needed peasants and serfs rather than teachers, lawyers, and engineers. Thus, he neglected the most fundamental and basic human right for a nation to grow organically and form a democratic government: education.[8] Cromer's intentions were clear. He asserts in *Modern Egypt*:

Do not let us imagine that, under any circumstances, we can ever create a feeling of loyalty in the breasts of the Egyptians akin to that felt by a

[7] The cantar is an obscure measurement that has no exact equivalent, as it ranges from one cantar being equal to143–148 kg. Hence three million cantars would be around 430,000 tons. Eight million would be around 1,145,000 tons.

[8] According to the historian Joel Beinin, Egypt turned into a multinational stock house for European capital during the years of Cromer: "European capital was heavily concentrated not in industry but in loans to the government, financing cotton cultivation, and the construction of a transportation network to facilitate the import-export trade. The Suez Canal, opened in 1869, was the crowning achievement of foreign capital in Egypt. This resulted in the development of the export sector of the economy and its necessary infrastructure while other sectors were largely neglected. The earliest concentrations of wage labor in Egypt were in the transport and public utilities sectors of the economy – sectors developed by European capital to meet its needs. The only significant exception to this trend was the establishment of a large scale cigarette industry by predominantly Greek capital and labor in the years after 1875. By 1906 there were 55–60 cigarette factories in Cairo and some enterprises employed as many as 500 workers" (Joel Beinin, "Formation of the Egyptian Working Class" [*MERIP Reports*, No. 94, Feb. 1981], p. 15).

self-governing people for indigenous rulers if, besides being indigenous, they are also beneficent. Neither by the display of good sympathy, nor by good government, can we forge bonds which will be other than brittle.[9]

It is also clear, based on the record of his shrewd, pragmatic political strategy in Egypt, that Cromer sought to avoid at all costs any confrontation between the Egyptians and the Army of Occupation. If anything, Denshawai distracted Cromer from completing all the tasks of the colonial agenda that were assigned to him or that he assigned to himself. Prior to Denshawai, the major demand of the opposition was basic education and equal opportunity employment, with a view toward an improvement of the quotidian conditions for Egyptians. Local presses called for making education a right for all Egyptians and establishing a national university, an urgent need that was not fulfilled until the departure of Cromer from Egypt in 1907. Muṣṭafá Kāmil's newspaper, *al-Liwā'*, published numerous articles criticizing the High Commissioner for turning a blind eye to the education of the Egyptian people. *Al-Mu'ayyad*, another local newspaper, denounced the practice of offering jobs to British and foreign subjects while denying them to Egyptians on the pretext that the latter were not educated enough.[10] Egyptian nationalists gained the impression that English education was not only privatized, catering to the elites as well as to the foreign minority, but also anglicized and tailored to produce submissive subjects. Clearly, educating the natives was never a part of the "civilizing mission" of British Imperialism. The point is that Cromer had a "quarter-of-a-century opportunity" to leave Egypt with a tangible promise toward self-rule, but he missed it; instead of supporting the education of Egyptians, marking his legacy by engraving his name on a public school or university, he chose instead to establish a tribunal, and marked his legacy with the blood of innocent Egyptians. But this book is about more than Cromer's Egypt; as the title suggests, it is, more precisely, about the relationship between Islam and the culture of modern Egypt. In order to introduce this relationship, the terms in the title must be explained.

[9] The Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 2 (New York: MacMillan Company, 1908), 570.

[10] See *al-Mu'ayyad* , November 13–14, 1893; November 28, December 23, 1894; January 14, February 17–19, March 17–18, June 25, 1895; January 20, March 13, October 28, 1900; February 3, June 16, 1901; March 4, October 8, 1902. See also *al-Liwā'*: January 30, February 11, 23, June 28, 1901; October 18–19, November 7, 1904.

Islam

To be a Muslim in Egypt today means living in a predominantly Sunni society, challenged by competing religiosities ranging from the conformist state-administered authority of Al-Azhar, Egypt's religious university, to politically oriented militant organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya*, *Jamāʿat al-Takfīr wa al-Hijra*, and *Jamāʿat al-Amr bil-Maʿrūf wa al-Nahyy ʿan al-Munkar*, to pacifist and non-political groups such as *Jamāʿat al-Tablīgh wa al-Daʿwa*, and a variety of Sūfī sects. This was not the case at the outset of the twentieth century, when religious authority in Muslim Egypt was mainly represented by al-Azhar and remained so until the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as an alternative non-conformist religious establishment in the late 1920s. A situation of this sort is not unique to modern Egypt. Across time and space, Muslim societies have shifted their ideologies; specific religious or devotional practices are only understood, tolerated, fostered, or oppressed within specific historical, theological, and geographical contexts. It is difficult, if not perilous, to explore challenging insights – as acceptable as they might have been in the past – into a rigid dogma already at odds with itself, at once calcified and contested by its own intra-religious tensions. Because Islam, like all religions, maintains its very existence in the world through faith, it is unsurprising that the orthodoxy of Islamic faith, which was mostly represented by al-Azhar at the outset of the last century, would attempt to crush so-called "secularist" or enemies of Islam.[11] Secularism, a term coined in Europe in 1851,[12] was translated into Arabic in the early 1900s as *ʿIlmāniyya*/*ʿĀlamaniyya*, and is now hypostasized in Islamist (and public) discourse as a state of un-Godliness akin to *kufr* (disbelief). Secularism has undoubtedly influenced major transitions in decolonizing societies, including in Egypt, where a supposed "earlier cohesiveness or integrity of man's social

[11] For more on the nexus between Egypt's postcolonial despotic regimes and the reification of militant religious thought, leading to the emergence of radical Islam and the rise of dangerous and fractious epistemologies in religious thought by the likes of Sayyid Qutb and others, see Mohammad Salama and Rachel Friedman, "Locating the Secular in Sayyid Qutb," *Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. XX No. 1: 104–31.

[12] By G. J. Hoyaoke. See Eric S. Waterhouse, "Secularism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, eds. James Hastings et al (Edinburgh: 1908–1921, vol. 11), 348.

and personal life," as Wilfred Cantwell Smith puts it, "once religiously expressed and religiously sanctified, has been fragmented."[13] As strong adherents found it difficult to compartmentalize their faith or to reconcile it with "worldly" aspects of societies, many proponents of the separation of mosque and state, including culture theorists and critics like ʻAbd al-Rāziq and Ḥusayn, as well as secular leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser, would immediately be targeted and labeled as enemies of Islam who must be killed or persecuted.

In the earlier decades leading to the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood and the rise of Nasserism, institutionalized religion had already created numerous challenges to independent Muslim thinkers. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, scholars with deep expertise in the culture of Islam, such as Muḥammad ʻAbduh, were expelled from the academy due to its one-dimensional vision and selective use of the Islamic past. Ḥusayn, who joined al-Azhar in 1902, owes much of his intellectual development as an *ʻālim* to the impressive teachings of al-Marṣafī, who was also accused of apostasy by the religious establishment for his non-traditional "scientific criticism" of pre-Islamic culture.[14] These tensions between liberal thought and traditionalism reflected a general mood on the part of the educated class in Egypt, although in today's terms ʻAbduh's pleas for introducing Islamic philosophy and al-Jurjānī's work on rhetoric and Qur'ānic *Iʻjāz* (inimitability and apologetics discourse) into a rigid Azharite curriculum seem quite moderate; indeed, they can hardly be characterized as liberal at all. It is these interactions between persons of letters and clergymen of the letter that formed the roots of cultural *nahḍa* (renaissance/revival/awakening) in modern Egypt.

This cultural renaissance was built on institutional responses to the quotidian complexities of political and social life. The clearer the image of a modern Egypt independent from Britain was, the more Egyptian intellectuals began to disentangle Islam from the traditionalisms and mythologies accumulated throughout the centuries. In light of the fierce competition over who was best qualified to rule Egypt, there was a tremendous need for new propaganda campaigns.

[13] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press Edition, 1991), 124.

[14] See Pierre Cachia, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance* (London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1956). See especially Cachia's Chapter 11 on "Scientific Criticism," 143–66.

In response to the increasing intervention of foreign powers in Egyptian affairs, numerous Egyptian intellectuals began to look back to the formative moments of Islam – the roots of their own civilization – to try to recapture a sense of authenticity and legitimation for Egyptians. They also began to realize that the West has repeatedly imposed itself on Egypt in the forms of Christian or secular military campaigns and invasions. There was an overwhelming sense of the urgent need for a renaissance to resurrect a body politic that would be both Egyptian and Islamic, although the term "Egypto-Islamic" did not necessarily go unchallenged.[15]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain's occupation of Egypt was becoming more and more customary and less and less of an event to the public. But for the Egyptian intelligentsia, political resistance continued in the form of nationalist resistance by figures like Muṣṭafá Kāmil, Muḥammad Farīd, and Saʿad Zaghlūl. Although Islam played a major role in their speeches and political agendas, it was not at all a dominant ideology in their ways of thinking. The educated Egyptians who grew up in the final years of the nineteenth century and imbibed secular calls for government, as well as the Islamic discussions of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh, reacted to those ideas in many of their writings; they included the pioneering poet Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī and his successors, Aḥmad Shawqī and Hāfiẓ Ibrāhīm. While it is difficult to judge how many were influenced by these new ideas, prior to the birth of the novel in

[15] The Egyptian economist Fawzy Mansour attributes the *nahḍa* directly to local concerns among Egyptians and Arabs and to emergent nationalistic sentiments against British imperialism, and not, as commonly believed, to political reactionary responses by the Ottoman empire to gain control over its lost territories:

"It will thus be seen that the argument, now popular in fundamentalist circles that the Ottoman Empire protected 'fellow Moslem' Arab countries against the onslaught of European imperialism is false. The empire did not protect any of these countries against really determined invasion by a Western country. When such invasion took place, the empire created conditions favourable to a much more insidious attack, that of economic colonialism proceeding under the protection and privileges granted by nominal Ottoman sovereignty. Finally, when a country like Egypt attempted to secede and establish an autonomous, modern economy, the Ottoman Empire participated very actively in a consortium of European powers whose aim was to return Egypt to the fold of economic dependency and underdevelopment." Fawzy Mansour, *The Arab World: Nation, State, and Democracy* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1992), 81.

Egypt, it is arguable that poetry reached an audience wider than did academic debates on religion. In any case, there is no doubt that such towering figures played an important role in shaping the Islamic tenor of the intellectual life of modern Egypt, stimulating fresh anti-establishment approaches to religion.

This new cultural perspective on religion was in every way informed by Egypt's encounter with Western Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as it became apparent that, for the first time in Islamic history, the political dominion of Islam was fading and that the so-called Muslim *umma* [nation] was at the weakest that it had ever been – socially, politically, economically, and militarily. Al-Afghānī and 'Abduh strove to reposition Islam in relationship to this foreign "Other," but more importantly to itself. Metropolitan society in Egypt seemed to have featured a social hierarchy of Sunni Muslims, consisting first of Turks and Turco-Egyptians; secondly of Coptic and Jewish minorities; and thirdly of others: peasants, Bedouins, a few North Africans (Algerians and Tunisians), a few natives of India, and a considerable number of Sudanese. Both Afghānī and 'Abduh believed that the revival of the Muslim *umma* and the encouragement of national progress required a healthier sense of unity among all Egyptians and a more efficient religious institute; they therefore worked for a serious reformation of al-Azhar and its outmoded approaches to science and education. Al-Afghānī, though not an Egyptian native, had a remarkable influence on Islamic political thought in Egypt. His key position in regard to political reform consisted of a strong advocacy for Islamic foundationalism and for the reunification of all Arab and Muslim states. Al-Afghānī believed that the only way to end European colonialism and prevent Western Europe from occupying more Muslim lands was to re-empower the Islamic *caliphate*, which at this point in history was represented by the fragile Ottoman Empire, whose sovereignty over all Muslim *wilāyāt* (administrative divisions) worldwide was increasingly embattled.

'Abduh, in contrast, developed a more expansive agenda than al-Afghānī's, and took a less rigid stand toward sociopolitical and cultural reform. Unlike al-Afghānī, 'Abduh cautioned against the return to foundationalism *per se*; instead, he called for a "neo-foundationalism," namely, a resurrection of core humanistic values in Islamic tradition. Espousing a comprehensive process that would include an *iṣlāḥ* (reform) not only of all religious institutes but also of social life, particularly in Egypt, and in the Islamic world in general, 'Abduh adopted a

polity of honesty and self-criticism. He acknowledged, in a surprisingly laudatory manner, that "oriental nations have no ambition, little hope of life, and [a] willing[ness] to accept inferiority, while the Western nations have the highest and noblest of objectives."[16] In the end, neither 'Abduh's idealism nor al-Afghānī's caliphism were successful in producing well-defined and sustained political movements and parties. It is not far-fetched, however, to consider the Muslim Brotherhood as an offshoot of al-Afghānī's vision for modern Islamism.

It was not until the late 1930s that the Muslim Brotherhood became the face of Islamism in modern Egyptian politics. From that decade on, the Muslim Brotherhood has been involved in shaping the country's political course, gaining immediate popularity upon its emergence in 1928 at the hands of Ḥasan al-Bannā, perhaps in response to the abolition of the Caliphate/Ottoman Empire in 1924. *Al-Ikhwān* (the Brothers), as the Muslim Brotherhood organization called itself, gradually began to infiltrate the Egyptian cultural scene and establish centers all over Egypt. As the reign of King Fārūq (1936–52) widened the chasm between Egyptian peasants and the landed elite, the Muslim Brotherhood sympathized with the oppressed and the needy, becoming the principal home for the poor and disenfranchised majority of Egyptians seeking justice and economic sustainability in a sharply class-divided country. In the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood clashed with King Fārūq, and its founder, Ḥasan al-Bannā, became its major martyr upon his assassination in 1949. The Muslim Brotherhood continued post-Fārūq and assisted Nasser and the Free Officers in the soft, non-violent military coup of 1952 that overthrew the kingdom and established the Republic. Before long, the Muslim Brotherhood became the enemy once again when Nasser and the aspiring leader Sayyid Qutb did not see eye to eye on Islamic governance. This disagreement led to the arrest of many members of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the imprisonment and subsequent execution of Qutb in 1966. The enmity between the Egyptian regime and the Muslim Brotherhood has continued from Fārūq all the way to Elsisi. Accruing victims/martyrs over its eighty-year existence, the Muslim Brotherhood gained legitimacy and sustainability as it continued to be the most organized and dedicated counter-government socio-political organization in Egypt.

[16] Muḥammad 'Abduh, "The Necessity of Religious Reform," in *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam*, eds. Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 48.

When the January 25, 2011 events took place, the lack of a central leadership with a clear post-Mubarak political agenda quickly led to the squandering of the hopes of the Egyptian Revolution. When the call for presidential elections was made, the only political body in Egypt prepared for leadership was the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, it was not surprising that Egypt's new democratically elected president would be an *Ikhwānī*, nor was it at all shocking that Mohammed Morsi spent the first six months of his presidency re-delineating Egypt's "Islamic face." Until June 30, 2013, Egypt had a President-Imam who broke out in Qur'ānic recitations in the middle of his political speeches and who began surrounding himself with Muslims on the basis of their affiliation with and loyalty to the Muslim Brotherhood, rather than their professional merit or bureaucratic competence. Many Egyptians felt that, after more than eighty years as the political underdogs, the Muslim Brotherhood deserved a chance to establish the rule of law and social justice. To the revolutionaries, the ending of tyranny and autocracy was the be-all and end-all of the Tahrir Revolt, and the expectation, at that historic moment of mass revolution, was that the age of autocratic terror was over and that a new era of liberal democracy had been born.[17]

[17] As soon as he took office, Morsi began to fully Islamicize his presidential cabinet as a clever move, to his peril, to preempt any action to depose him. Seen within the context of the Egyptian political system, the Egyptian army's recent contravention of democracy/constitutionality and Abdul Fatah al-Sisi's rise to power may indeed appear to some to be the only hope for saving democracy from falling into a hopeless precipice of theocracy. Indeed, there is no democracy in theocracy, and Morsi's failure to respond to the pulse of the Egyptian street, as well as his exclusive partisanship, has ended the legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood, condemning them to a vicious yet familiar underground. Even though Morsi did Egypt a severe disservice during his short and unfinished term by continuing to solidify his Islamist base while seeking to transform the country into an obedient and compliant Islamist theocracy, we must nevertheless ask: Is a military coup or so-called "assisted removal" of a democratically elected president indeed the correct response, or, to present one alternative, should Morsi have been impeached through legal channels? While the popular upheaval of June 30, 2013 and al-Sisi's subsequent overthrow of Morsi has indeed crippled the Muslim Brotherhood's authority in future affairs for generations to come, history teaches us that military intervention is just another variation on the theme of despotic fundamentalism and an unfortunate testimony of Egypt's failure to sustain the core principles of its hard-fought revolution.

Culture

"Culture" is an ambiguous term, shot through with references and allusions that cross many disciplines. It is therefore important that I define as clearly as possible the sense in which I do and do not use "culture" in this study. I do not use it in the anthropological sense of examining patterns of human thought or behavior; nor do I do so in the sense of exploring the history of ideas, as for example in Edward William Lane's nineteenth-century *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (New York: Dover, 1973) [1860]. I do so, rather, in the sense of a critical reflection on knowledge, in the spirit of Raymond Williams' entry on "culture" in *Keywords*. Williams concludes his entry by stressing the ambivalence of the term, which often results in outright hostility when it "involv[es] claims to superior knowledge, refinement and distinction between 'high art' (culture) and popular art and entertainment."[18] These are claims that Williams, of course, rejects. A recognition of this ambivalence is also present in the Arabic concept of *thaqāfa* (culture). Deriving from the Arabic root "ث ق ف," *thaqāfa* is etymologically related to terms for the art of sword fighting, for polishing arrows, and for the stinging taste of vinegar, as well as denoting perspicacity and sharp intelligence. The Egyptian literary critic Majdī Wahbah, in *al-Muʿjam al-Waṣīṭ* of the Society of Arabic Language in Cairo, cites the following understanding of *thaqāfa* as the most commonly used definition of culture in Egyptian Arabic: "*al-thaqāfa hiya al-ʿulūm wa al-maʿārif wa al-funūn al-latī yuṭlab al-ḥadhq fīhā*" (culture constitutes all the sciences, epistemologies, and the arts that ought to be approached with critical perspicacity).[19] Wahbah's *thaqāfa* emphasizes inward receptions of and critical reflections on knowledge (especially in the context of colonial as well as comparative exchange of ideas). *Thaqāfa* can be distinguished from the work of departments of classics and archeology that aim primarily to shed light on the past, perhaps, in the process, making tenuous connections with the present. This contemporary academic focus is itself part of a

[18] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 92.

[19] Majdī Wahbah, "Mafhūm al-Thaqāfa" [The Meaning of Culture] in *al-Adab al-Muqāran* [*Comparative Literature*] (Giza: al-Sharika al-ʻĀlamiyya li-l-Nashr, 1991), 94.

new episteme, a post-enlightenment way of categorizing/classifying knowledge. As such, it is perhaps the dominant Foucauldian *énoncé* of our age on the historical and economic realities accompanying the production of knowledge – one which Wahbah associates more with *ḥaḍāra* (civilization), connoting historical traditions, whether classical, Islamic, pre-Islamic, or ancient Egyptian, than with *thaqāfa* (culture).

Wahbah's distinction between *thaqāfa* and *ḥaḍāra* is the main point of entry for the definition of culture in this study. Wahbah acknowledges that "*qad yaḍīq maʿaná al-thaqāfa ḥattá la yatajāwaz majālāt al-funūn wa al-ādāb wa baʿḍ jawānib al-ʿilm*" (culture could be used in a narrow sense to refer to arts and literature and some aspects of knowledge),[20] but he rejects this parochial sense. Many conflicting, narrowly focused, approaches attempted to account for the "culture" of modern Egypt. British colonialism was a nasty, brutal, and limiting reality, an imposition of Western modernity whose protracted consequences continue to be felt throughout Egypt. But it was France, not Britain, that played a major role in inspiring *les beaux arts* of modern Egypt. An intellectual current of Islamic thought, with various offshoots, also sought to position Egypt in opposition to and sometimes in symbiosis with the culture of Western Europe. An incipient Egyptianism was born out of the colonial experience in search of a national identity and a pathway for the future of culture in Egypt. Who is to say which of these components was more, or less, influential in the *thaqāfa* of modern Egypt? This book is therefore not an attempt to argue for dominant cultural ideology; it is an examination of the ontologically diverging, mutually informing, and continually ramifying currents that presented themselves in less commonly studied areas of cultural thought in modern Egypt.

Islam and the Culture of Modern Egypt thus encompasses certain cultural narratives – novelistic and cinematic – that have developed out of particular historical circumstances. Nationalism would be unthinkable without Denshawai and the denial of postsecondary education for Egyptians. Islamism would be unimaginable without the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the official end of *al-khilāfa al-Islāmiyya* (Islamic Caliphate) in 1924. The Humanities could not be conceived outside the expatriation of Egyptian scholars, the influence of the French

[20] Ibid.

Revolution, as well as the romanticism and realism that flooded the French cultural milieu of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even existentialism, which influenced many modern Egyptian expatriates who traveled to France during and after the First World War, including Ḥusayn and al-Ḥakīm, would itself be inconceivable without both the crisis in European thought that resulted from the horrors and losses of the First World War and the growth in the academic and cultural prestige of the natural sciences *vis-à-vis* literature. Nasser's Pan-Arabism could not be envisaged outside a framework of the Second World War, the corrupt monarchy, the nationalist project, Britain's proxy colonialism, and so on. Although these connections may seem obvious, they must be re-emphasized in an age of shifting scholarly emphases, where rigorous intellectual histories are frequently demoted to "sub-cultures" in positivistic disciplines like anthropology and, more generally, in the social sciences, where cultural history is either ignored altogether or quickly dismissed as being irrelevant to a presumably dispassionate and non-essentialist historical framework.[21]

In fact, contemporary scholarship on Islam in modern Egypt has, for the most part, focused on the social sciences and the theology of the Ottoman empire, or what was left of it, rather than on the humanities, thus creating a noticeable epistemological imbalance. This unevenness has resulted in a bewildering separation between the social sciences and the humanities, raising varied questions of value, reliability, and verifiability in regard to national identity formations, the acquisition of knowledge, and historical accuracy. Even when the humanities is invoked, as I will elucidate in what follows, this invocation serves only to use "culture" to support a predetermined conclusion. The result is that most of modern Egypt's cultural heritage and its signifying documents (from archival pamphlets, to radical Islamist writings, to sermonic cassette tapes, to piety gatherings) has been surgically yet ahistorically sliced up by the so-called "deterministic sciences," falling prey to the lingering Eurocentrisms of positivistic disciplines in regard to what counts as evidence and what is to be dismissed as suspect, "singular, and unverifiable," to borrow Spivak's words.[22] A study of Islam and culture in modern Egypt – a study that

[21] Williams, *Keywords*, 92–3.

[22] I have addressed this notion of "anthropology from above" elsewhere. See e.g., Mohammad Salama, *The Qur'ān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism: From Tāhā to Nasr* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

takes up culture not as institutional theology (whatever that entails) but as an artistic inheritance, a creator of traditions, a social practice, and as a deciding influence on questions of humanism and secularism – compels one to question common understandings of culture, to consider their implications and ramifications in a manner that expands and challenges both positivistic and structuralist approaches to Islam, especially in the matter of what constitutes verifiable historical documents for the study of Islamic cultures.

A good case in point is G. E. von Grunebaum's definition of influence and socio-religious transformations in modern Islamic societies. von Grunebaum conceives of influence as a phenomenon that is either internal or external. He defines the latter as "heterogenetic" and the former as "orthogenetic." To von Grunebaum, a heterogenetic influence is a phenomenon "noted when (a) a solution to a cultural problem, (b) a problem, or (c) both are introduced from outside into a system to which the problem and/or solution are not germane."[23] An orthogenetic influence or transformation, on the other hand, is one that emanates from within the community itself, more typically from a marginalized group that is "by no means alien to the community before the transformation sets in."[24] While von Grunebaum sees the two sides of influence as common in "the prevailing 'system'"[25] of most cultures, he contends that there is a characteristic tendency among receiving communities, and in this particular case among modern Muslim communities, to interpret heterogenetic changes as orthogenetic.[26]

This is where a rigid binary structuration of influences gets skewed. Even if we were to agree that influence could be sliced into two binary oppositional categories with such surgical and ahistorical accuracy, how is one, in a post-Orientalist age, to interpret von Grunebaum's characterization of Muslim societies as suffering from "psychological difficulties"[27]? Wouldn't a counterargument indeed be equally true, e.g. that there is a tendency in Orientalist scholarships on Muslim societies to view orthogenetic transformations as heterogenetic? While von Grunebaum acknowledges (in the margins) that

[23] G. E. von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 21.
[24] Ibid., 20.
[25] Ibid., 21.
[26] Ibid., 20.
[27] Ibid.

influence and transformation could be local and germane to their own native communities, he qualifies this definition of influence with an exteriority he deems inevitable, asserting that the "legitimate use of the word 'influence' has also been argued in cases where an outside impulse affects the intensity, or the quality, of the manifestation of an essentially native trait."[28] This approach to influence, which acknowledges yet disparages orthogenetic cultural transformations in Muslim societies, if such a term is indeed valid, and dismisses them as psychologically in denial, must be addressed and corrected before any materialist articulations of cultures can be useful.

Furthermore, in his last chapter, consciously or not, von Grunebaum uses 'cultural' instances from modern Egypt in order to advance a Eurocentric thesis. For instance, von Grunebaum characterizes Muḥammad 'Abduh as irreparably orthogenetic, that is, as denying Western contribution to the world and to Islamic cultural heritage. Von Grunebaum makes reference to a specific quote that he takes indirectly from 'Abduh's disciple, Rashīd Riḍā, in which 'Abduh early in his career is claimed to have said that, "there is nothing in books other than our own which adds anything to our heritage."[29] This is a gross mischaracterization of 'Abduh's legacy. In fact, 'Abduh's antagonism towards al-Azhar, which resulted in his final decision to resign in 1905, is predicated on al-Azhar's total dismissal of the tradition of reason and of the Western hybridization of Islamic philosophy which 'Abduh embraces and which, as he emphasizes, finds influence in Greek philosophy, notably the Aristotelian tradition. This acknowledgment is reflected in many works, including his important, but less studied, work on philosophers and Islamic *kalām*.[30]

Another example of von Grunebaum's tendentiousness is his discussion of two works by al-Ḥakīm and Ḥusayn, respectively, in which he asserts that Ḥusayn's 1938 *Adīb* (*A Man of Letters*) is superior as a work of literature to al-Ḥakīm's 1938 '*Usfūr min al-Sharq* (*Bird of the*

[28] Ibid., 21, n. 1.

[29] Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbduh* [*History of the Imam Shaykh Muhammad ʿAbduh*], vol. 2 (2nd. ed., Cairo, 1925), 353. Quoted in von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam*, 351–2 (ft, 24).

[30] See al-Shaykh Muḥammad *ʿAbduh Bayna al-Falāsifa wa al-Kalāmiyyīn* [*Shaykh Muḥammd ʿAbduh between Philisophers and Kalamis*], Vol. 1, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār Iḥiyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1958). See especially Sulaymān's Introduction, pp. 3–64.

East) for no other reason than its protagonist's total rejection of the East and immersion in the West.[31] Based on his odd dismissal of al-Ḥakīm's text as scarcely amounting to a work of literature at all,[32] it is hard to see what theory of literary criticism or what tools of critique have allowed von Grunebaum to engage with two subtle literary texts, and to reach such conclusions other than on a superficial level of thin plot summaries where one protagonist rejects the West while the other embraces it. Indeed, his simplistic reading of both texts makes it difficult not only for the literary critic, but also for the informed reader to take seriously von Grunebaum's literary musings on al-Ḥakīm and Ḥusayn's novels. It seems that von Grunebaum's understanding of modern Islam's "search for cultural identity" – a peculiar title in its own right, conveying loss, disorientation, a stupefying predicament, and a *telos* of identity – is a scholarly project in which a version of Egypt's Islamic culture has become a product of a certain ideology if not a commodity for Western consumption. This type of academic determinism von Grunebaum employs to diminish 'Abduh's legacy and present him as a regressive anti-Western exclusivist reveals problematic orientalist biases that must be confronted by the sharp edges of historical materialism and cultural critique.

A cultural critique of Islam cannot and should not be reduced to abstract intellectual exchanges on Islam and modernity between Muḥammad 'Abduh and Renan, or to the problematic reification of theological institutions like al-Azhar and its demonization of revolutionary anti-establishment thinkers like 'Abd al-Rāziq, Ḥusayn, or Mahfouz.[33] Culture in its totality dictates that there should be as much Islam in al-Azhar *fatwá* (religious decree) or *awqāf* (endowments)

[31] von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam*, 377–8.
[32] Ibid., 375.
[33] See Johanna Pink, "Where does Modernity Begin? Muḥammad al-Shawkānī and the Tradition of *Tafsīr*" in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, eds. Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 323–36. Pink's provocative and important study of the Yemeni exegete Muḥammad al-Shawkānī questions the accuracy of periodizational thought in discussing Islam (in this particular case, Qur'ānic exegesis) in relationship to modernity. Pink expertly deconstructs the modern/pre-modern dichotomy and conventional understandings of modernity/modernization as a condition that must have prompted shifts in exegetical contents as an attempt to "'catch up with' Western-dominated modernity and redefine the place of the Islamic cultural heritage with respect to a Western counterpart" (ibid., 324).

records as there is in a novel by Haykal or a film by Chahine. *Thaqāfa* includes the study of the artistic expressions of varied aspects of life and ways of understanding and living in the world under various doctrines, ideologies, or belief systems, which all are subject to the political, economic, and social realities of a given time. It is therefore crucial to conceive of a term like "culture" in all its Egyptian iterations as a concept that will allow us to rethink the history and influence of Islam on modern Egypt, especially in the aftermath of an era that seems to have forgotten how to think historically.

Modernity

Can we construct a culture of modernity as a political and artistic force free from the taint of imperialism? Can we ignore the fact that the promotion of a global economy of imperialism has always been coterminous with the denigration of nativist cultures outside of Europe? A simple and straightforward answer to these questions is "No." But this impossibility of viewing modernity apart from imperialism does not suggest that colonized cultures (always in the plural, within and among others – i.e. "culture" is never monolithic, never static, but always multiple, motive, contested) like that of Egypt would still pay homage to its own tradition and some resources in the forms and ideas of the very modernity imposed by that empire.

In the conclusion of "Modernity and Revolution," Perry Anderson writes: "Modernism as a notion is the emptiest of all cultural categories … it designates no describable object in its own right at all: it is completely lacking in positive content … what is concealed beneath the label modernism is … a portmanteau concept whose only referent is the blank passage of time itself."[34] Pierre Cachia's questionable argument that there has been a "faintness of Islamic inspiration in modern Arabic literature" clearly demonstrates the limitations of this "empty notion."[35] Cachia's argument seems to find support in a

[34] Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds., Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 332.

[35] For an elaborate discussion of the complexity of modernism and modernity as definitive categories, see Richard Sheppard, "Modernism and Modernity: The Problem of Definition," *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 1–30.

number of Egyptian writers, such as Ḥusayn, al-Ḥakīm, and Mahfouz, whose works figure as a genuinely emancipatory source for secular modernity in colonial Egypt. Take for instance Ḥusayn's provocative thesis in *fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī* (*On Pre-Islamic Poetry*), which attempts to prove that the Arabic poetry of the pre-Islamic era is actually not pre-Islamic but, rather, composed during and after the advent of Islam; or al-Ḥakīm's invocation of the Qurʾān to compose a play, *Ahl el-Kahf* (*The People of the Cave*), thematizing the helplessness of humans before time and the existentialist dilemma of life on earth, *à la* Sophocles. However, it is hard to argue that the writings Cachia cites do indeed stand apart from the dominant culture of Islam. In fact, all the authors cited by Cachia composed numerous texts either in response to various currents of Islamic thought – e.g. al-Ḥakīm's apologetic play *Muḥammad* (a belated yet powerful response to Voltaire's *Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète*, which he read in 1925), or Mahfouz's *Awlād Ḥāratinā* (*Children of the Alley*), which offers a history of God and addresses the relationship among the three Abrahimic religions – or as an attempt to correct widespread misconceptions of important events in the Islamic world, e.g. Ḥusayn's *al-Fitna al-Kubrá* (*The Great Sedition*). Although not included in Cachia's study, Ḥusayn's *ʿalá Hāmish al-Sīra* (*On the Margin of the Biography of the Prophet*) and ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād's *ʿAbqariyyat Muḥammad* (*The Genius of Muhammad*) are also cases in point. It is therefore parochial to claim that Islamic inspiration in modern Arabic literature is "faint," unless by "inspiration" Cachia refers to something quite arbitrary, like an attraction to fundamentalism. In any case, this attraction has infiltrated the intellectual paradigms of many modern Egyptian authors, including Aḥmad Bākathīr, Khālid Muḥammad Khālid, and Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, most notably in Bākathīr's *al-Thāʾir al-Aḥmar* (*The Red Revolutionary*), which I discuss in Chapter 6. Islam has indeed offered modern Egyptian culture rich models for literary, cinematic, and philosophical expressions, allowing for the exploration of new levels of autonomy and transformation in the relation between God and desire, and morality and knowledge, as well as the sacred and the secular.

In order to address the history of modern Egyptian culture and its rich literary and cinematic traditions, and to raise theoretical questions about how its cultural movements are carried through space and time, it is important to examine how tenuous the demarcation

lines are between the modern, the pre-modern, and the Islamic. How is a canon conceived of and perpetuated when it is based on a selective reading of its essential components and of its formative prehistory, which is at odds with historical reality? How do criticisms central to cultural representations of Islam in colonial and early postcolonial Egypt engage with the texts that both authors and scholars call modern? How do we examine this condition of the modern *vis-à-vis* Islam, colonialism, and decolonization? More importantly, if culture in its highest and lowest forms represents the degree of progress and development of a nation, how has colonial and early postcolonial Egypt experienced the dialect between Islam and the secular, between the doctrinal resolve to render the nation subservient to the purpose of God, and the urges of secular modernity to make it accountable only to itself?

Examining these questions and assessing the sway of the Islamic – in all its varied associations and stimuli – on the cultural history of modern Egypt, one must first have an understanding of the modern. It is neither fair nor correct to compare European modernity, for instance, to Egyptian, or Russian, or Latin American modernity. Time is not universal. Therefore, one must be careful of the ways that particular literary texts thrive within, through, and beyond local conditions and domestic norms that situate or displace, invoke or divorce, sacralize or vulgarize, revolt against or associate with, resurrect, cannibalize, or decisively break away from its so-called tradition.

Defining Egyptian modernity is not an easy task. Defining modernity is plagued not simply by the fact that even its artistic off-shoot, namely modernism, is a "portmanteau notion" that lacks "positive content," as Anderson puts it, but also by an almost endless proliferation and constant reproduction of definitions. Many such definitions – including those that are genre-oriented or departmental, as well as those that are historical, geographical, or both – have worked to defend or stake out territory for the modern in an ultimately stultifying manner; these definitions confuse more than they clarify. When we look closely at this proliferation of definitions, we see that each articulates claims about the essential truth of modernism, but most of these claims, particularly those that describe modernism as a category specific to Europe, are, without acknowledging the fact, responses to relatively recent historical developments. The indistinctness, multiplicity, and contingency of these definitions suggest that we have more

to gain by observing how the terms "modern" and "modernist" are used, and how distinctions within them allow for a more informed understanding of their specific historical conditions, than we do by hypostatizing, and thereby universalizing, *the* "modern."

What then, one may ask, will a study of Islam and the culture of modern Egypt accomplish? Will we learn something different or "new" about Egyptian culture by way of modernity? Will we learn something about the ramifications of modernity from the perspective of a predominantly Islamic Egyptian culture? I hope I have positive answers to all these questions, but at least I aim to address them carefully. The principal objective of this study, however, is to investigate Egypt's encounter with both its own tradition(s) and those of Western Europe, and to assess the consequences of this encounter in order to re-think and to re-describe the experience of modernity in terms nuanced, neglected, and negated. I intend to do so not only from modernity's margins, but also from beyond the narrow perspectives of religious and nationalist paradigms dictated by those very margins. Overall, one cannot simply assume that the entire production of Egyptian literature and film during the colonial period remains necessarily "anti-Islamist" and anti-colonial, or that Egypt's experience of Western modernity through France and England is in all possibilities intrinsically harmful. The inherent and the monolithic are un-thinking companions. It is seriously misleading to insist that national sentiments, echoed in textual and visual narratives, are identical and indistinguishable, that the novel and film art speak for the nation, and that the nation categorically projects itself through its textual and cinematic narratives or that all "third world literature" is, in that sense, necessarily allegorical.[36]

[36] In regard to how "nation" functions here, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991); see also George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). In regard to so-called third-world literature, see Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" *Social Text*, 15 (Fall 1986), pp. 65–88. Jameson's article was the subject of many debates. With a situational consciousness of his own position, Aijaz Ahmad responded with a sustained critique of Jameson's claim, accusing Jameson's ideology of "dividing the world between those who make history and those who are mere objects of it." See Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory," *Social Text*, 17 (Fall 1987), p. 7.

I start, then, with the premise that modernity left modern Egypt with a moot question of identity, a typical postcolonial issue. Modernity, especially in its forceful colonial and cultural impact, is intertwined with the culture of Islamic Egypt: in the social and political life, in history, and in academic and nonacademic imaginings. Most definitions of the modern suffer from a de-anthropologizing of the term by treating it only as a distinct literary, artistic, visual, or philosophical category or movement; such definitions seek to extract something essential from it, often trying to find the common denominator of a modernism that exists within the various socio-cultural locations wherever it is encountered. But this commonality constitutes the surface and the blueprint through which we should begin to investigate "the modern" in Egypt. The industrialism of Europe's colonial modernity was felt so heavily that it propelled Egyptians to find themes and forms of expressions to reassert, question, or further explore their variegated identities. It therefore makes sense that perennial themes relating to Egypt's long history – including the pharaonic, the Mediterranean, and the Islamic – would increasingly compel authors alongside the theme of the country's encounter with colonial Europe. As I discuss literary and cinematic narratives produced by Egyptians, primarily for an Egyptian audience, the key question that invites itself and that permeates this study is the question of Egyptian, identity: What does it mean to be an Egyptian, who were the Egyptians, and who are the Egyptians now?

Yet, questions of identity are never easy to answer, precisely because of the complex and multiple ethnographic, religious, nationalist, and political ramifications surrounding the term. G. E. von Grunebaum attempted to find an answer to this question. In the opening chapter of his book, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*, he argues that the demarcation line between a medieval and modern Muslim society is simply a matter of identitarian priorities, that "throughout most of the Medieval Ages man is a Christian or Muslim first, a native of his own home district and subject of the local lord next, and only last a Frenchman, an Egyptian, or a German."[37] As the continued contestations of identity show us – contestations that, in part, constitute an identity as live, dynamic, operative – not only has such an essentialist

[37] G. E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 1.

approach to medieval and modern Islam been exposed as incorrect in recent scholarships,[38] but the oversimplification of identity and casting it into the sacred-versus-secular debate also fails to recognize a web of intertwined religiosities, ideologies, localities, ethnicities, and nationalities that is far more complex than a hierarchical reduction to a Muslim-versus-Christian or a God-versus-the-state position can convey.

This view of continuously reshuffled human identities in response to changing priorities does not mean, however, that von Grunebaum's theory lacks a certain validity. After all, the experience of colonialism, the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of nationalism, and the secularization of Egyptian legislative, judiciary, and executive authorities have changed the face of Islamic Egypt. Nonetheless, the realities one is left with is that there are considerably different historical and cultural conceptions both of what it means to be Egyptian and what it means to be Islamic.

For example, some scholars argue that modernity revived Islamic thought and compelled Muslim intellectuals to revisit and critique the tradition in which they situate themselves.[39] Another group of scholars differ on the definition of reform in relationship to modernity, and regard the Muslim scholars who engage in reforming their tradition in reaction to modernity, as missing the core understanding of Islamic reform.[40] A third group sees modernity as a pure nemesis of Islam and its cultures. Munīr Shafīq, for instance, offers a counter-enlightenment thesis on the mythologies of modernity and European progress. Shafīq argues that the term *nahḍa* (renaissance/revival) and its subsequent offshoots of *iṣlāḥ* (reform) in the modern Arab Muslim world signify an abandonment of Arab Muslim cultures and the

[38] See for instance, Muhsin al-Musawi's exposition of Orientalist periodizations in *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

[39] See e.g. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[40] See for instance, Eltigani Abdulqadir Hamid, "The Concept of Reform in the Qurʾān" in *Coming to Terms with the Qur'an*, eds. Khaleel Mohammed and Andrew Rippin (New Jersey: Islamic Publications International, 2007), 3–33. While Eltigani advocates a different approach to Qur'ānic reform, notably through morphological exhaustions of terms like *fasād* and *Iṣlāḥ*, he seeks to rechannel traditional scholarly interest in associating the ideology of reform with modernity in Muslim thinkers like Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā.

displacement of Islam with a Western culture. In other words, Shafīq considers the *Aufklärung* a project to be in "bad faith," and he sees the subsequent acculturations of Muslim societies an act of violent uprooting. To Shafīq, acculturation is tantamount to the extinction of the light of Islam, a foreclosure of its cultural networks, if not a total imperial imperative that Muslim societies comply with a new set of "ungodly cultures." Shafīq labels European modernity a threat to Muslim identities and its acculturation project as a barbaric erasure of Islam hiding under the garb of ridding Muslim societies of barbarism and bringing "civilization" to the world.[41]

In this respect, the veil is a complex and important trope for the process of acculturation by which societies subsume habits from the past and re-adapt them to new purposes. The veil has long been a traditional garb in Egypt, in the form of the *ṭarḥa* (head scarf) or other variations like the *ḥijāb*, *khimār*, or *ḥāyik* – among Copts and Jews as well as Muslims – which can be traced back to pre-Islamic times. In the present day, many Muslim women opt to wear the veil freely and willingly for genuinely faith-based reasons. However, what must be recorded historically is that the Islamic emphasis on decency and modesty of appearance for both and men and women, as equal inhabitants of the public space, has been co-opted into a patriarchal discourse that predated Islam, and the veil has become a prominent sign of gender oppression and inequality. The Western imperialists, in turn, employing a modernist discourse of liberation, pointed to the subjugation of women behind the veil of a calcified Islam as a justification for their own program of colonial subjugation. They did little, however, to liberate the veiled woman, since it was not in their interest to do so. Egyptian nationalists, in *their* turn, fell into the colonial trap of imaging and imagining the nation as a veiled woman who must be protected against the Western usurper. Women, literally and figuratively, thus became the fuel of Egyptian nationalism. The actual status of the veiled woman did not change, but the trope of the veil came to symbolize both the sacredness of the nation state and the prohibitions of a dominant patriarchal religion.

[41] Munīr Shafīq, *al-Islām fī Maʿrakat al-Ḥaḍāra* [*Islam in the War of Civilization*] (Lebanon: Dār al-Nāshir, and Tunis: Dār al-Burāq lil-Nashar, 1991), 61. See in particular Chapter 2, Section Five "Bāb fī Rafḍ al-Intiqā' iyya bayna al-Turāth wa al-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya" (A Section on the Rejection of the Eclectic [use of] Tradition and of Western Modernity), 81–5.

In the literary and visual culture of modern Egypt, we see how the *ḥijāb* trope changes its function according to the Islamist or Egyptian nationalist ideologies at work.[42] The Islamic *ḥijāb*, rather than the traditional Egyptian *ṭarḥa*, is markedly absent in most of the narratives selected for this study, including those by Ḥaqqī, Haykal, al-Ḥakīm, Idrīs, and even Chahine. In Ḥaqqī and Haykal, the veil trope does not appear literally: if there is a veil, it is a figurative one, the veil of ignorance and bias which blinds the nation to social justice and the restoration of reason, until it can triumph over stifling and antiquated tradition. Ḥaqqī's peasants in the *Virgin of Denshawai* are metaphorically veiled; they are the victims left in the dark, whose credulity, as depicted in the trial scene of the novel's eighth chapter, is revealed in order both to produce laughter and to deepen the reader's sense of the barbarism of the occupation as it finds ways to justify the killing of naïve and innocent civilians. Think of a deceptive killer leading blindfolded and trusting victims to their death.

Unlike Ḥaqqī, Haykal opts to face the veil of traditionalism openly. That is, Haykal chooses direct confrontation over subtle allegory, and self-critique over tongue-in-cheek satirizing of the barbarity and vulgarity of the dominating "Other." In Haykal, the entirety of Egypt is veiled in unhealthy traditionalism, making the trope an urgent call for Egypt to cast of the veil of ignorance and customs in an act of rebirth and liberation.

These varied critiques of the veil from within a predominantly Muslim society are quite ironic when compared to the enormous body of Western writings on Islam, from Lord Cromer to Stephen Harper, where the *ḥijāb* becomes a prominent symbol of the East–West divide and a metonym for oriental repression versus Western liberalism.[43] In further irony, the veil would loom large on the Arab/Muslim colonial scene mid-century when Frantz Fanon discusses the unveiling of

[42] This metonymy has also been discussed in various colonial and postcolonial discourses. See for instance, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 23.

[43] See Cromer *Modern Egypt*; see also *Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 153. See also Katherine Bullock's chapter "The Veil in Colonial Times" in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002). See Mohammad Salama, "It's the Niqab Again: Stephen Harper and the Barbarism of Politics" (Stanford: Arcade Blog, October 19, 2015).

Algeria in *A Dying Colonialism*, an unveiling that receives yet another nationalist twist in the dramatic secularization the viewer witnesses in Chahine's film on the Algerian war of independence.

Modernism

In cultural terms, Egyptian modernism is among those "other" non-European modernisms that have often been studied not as a mirror or a reflection of a Western ideal, but tangentially and epiphenomenally. Due to the domination of this view of modernism in the Arab world, the term "modernism" in modern Arabic criticism has acquired more stability than it has in the West, a reification that leads many critics to take the term for granted.[44] For instance, a study of modern Arabic poetry by Ṣalāḥ Faḍl refers to *al-ḥadātha* (literary modernism) as a flood that has almost drowned the essential qualities and uniqueness of Arabic literature. The monstrosity of Arabic poetic modernism, according to Faḍl, consists mainly of a variety of factors that have caused inordinately rapid and inappropriate changes to the field of Arabic literature, both thematically and stylistically. To present this case thoroughly, I quote Faḍl's summary at length:

> The first factor is the eruption of many schools of poetry in a short historical span, beginning with the resurrection school at the hands of al-Bārūdī, which continued with Shawqī, Ḥāfiẓ, al-Zahāwī, and al-Raṣṣāfī throughout the first decades of the century… But before this movement even came to end three other schools of poetry emerged, representing the so-called 'broken wings of romanticism', to borrow Jibrān's catchy image: (1) the immigrant-school with its prophets and disciples who range from Jibrān to Mīkhāʾīl Nuʿayma to Īlīyā Abū Māḍī, and others; (2) the Dīwān School in Egypt, with the leadership of poets like al-ʿSchoo, Shukrī, and al-Māzinī who used the Romantic theory of English literature to critique the school of al-Iḥyāʾ, but ending up producing a different and non-popular style of poetic composition; (3) the Apollo school, which was founded by Aḥmad Zakī

[44] See for instance Aḥmad Haykal, *Taṭawwūr al-Adab al-Ḥadīth fī Miṣr* [*The Development of Modern Literature in Egypt*] (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1971); Anas Dāwūd, *Usif, fī al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī al-ture i* [*Myth in Modern Arabic Poetry*] (Cairo: Maktabat ʿAyn Shams, 1975); Shawqī Ḍayf, *Dirāsāt fī al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāṣir* [*Studies in Contemporary Arabic Poetry*] (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1959). See also Alī ʿAshrī Zāyid, 'An Binā' al-Qaṣīda al-ʿArabiyya al-Ḥadītha [*On the Structure of the Modern Arabic Poem*] (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-ʿUlūm, 1979).

Abū Shādī and chaired by Shawqī. The third wing represents the eruption of *Shi'r al-Taf'īla* [Free Verse] and its concomitance with the rise of nationalism in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. This school shattered the Arabic poetic tradition, changed poetic forms, and took up Arab socialist, ideological, and nationalist themes. The prominent figures of this school include al-Sayyāb, Nāzik al-Malā'ika, al-Bayatī, Nizār Qabbānī, 'Abd al-Ṣabūr, Ḥijāzī, Khalīl Ḥāwī, and many others.

The second factor is the inability of educational institutions to catch up with the speed of these movements; most of them dwelled too much on the resurrection phase while quickly dismissing the romantic school. Add to this, the slow and uninformed journalistic criticism which failed miserably to comprehend or assess the magnitude of change in modern Arabic poetry.

The third factor lies in creating foreignness and defamiliarization in Arabic poetry, which confused poetry readers and deprived them of the straightforward and direct message of the traditional poetry they were used to, to the extent that some recent poetic productions appear as if they are pale translations of texts that belong to other continents and other alien cultures.[45]

Faḍl's approach to the loss of traditional poetry is nostalgic and yearns for a time when poetry was the "musical voice of the political and social life," when it was "front-paged on daily papers" because to him, the traditional *qaṣīda* better reflected the pulse of "the political, social, and economic events."[46] According to Faḍl, modernism happened "too quickly and too soon" for Arabic literature, creating a gulf between readers and texts and alienating art by embracing difficulty and abstraction. Poetic Modernism in Faḍl's eyes is "haughty," "irresponsible," and "at risk" of losing both the music and the deep significations that characterize the traditional *qaṣīda*:

> Modernism is a movement of speed, one that alienated the reader and rushed the Arabic language into losing its organic genuineness without allowing the opportunity for steady development so it could pull forward the heavy train of Arabic culture and not just one compartment at the expense of all others.[47]

[45] Ṣalāḥ Faḍl, *Taḥawwulāt al-Shi'riyya al-'Arabiyya* [*Transformations of Arabic Poetics*] (Al-Hay'a al-Mis of A al-'Āmma lil-Kitāb, 2002), 8–10.

[46] Ibid., 11.

[47] Ibid.,16. Faḍl's criticism of modernism as "too fast, too soon" is indeed part of a defense of an orthodoxy that likes to believe that the end of classicism is the also the end of art. Hence Faḍl's persistent concern that the transformations brought by *al-ḥadātha* have deformed the so-called integral and unified body of the Arabic *qaṣīda*. It is evident from Faḍl's criticism of what he perceives as the negative effects of literary modernity on Arabic literature that there is a remarkable tension between literature and literary criticism.

Faḍl does not address various understandings, but he chooses instead to emphasize the invasive implications of a modernism expanding beyond the Western paradigm. Instead of seeing modernity as a foreign invasion, it would have been more effective to search for the possible existence of a new kind of reality in the text of an "Other" literary tradition. Criticism indeed benefits from discovering a new literary constellation, a space and time between coherently related differences in European and Egyptian modernisms, and to limn therein a set of possibilities that allows what we call modern Egyptian literary and visual culture to respond to shared aspects of various historical and socio-political contexts. Even if Egypt's cultural modernity is, because of colonial imposition and absorption, only thinkable in relation to the West, the emergence of the modern does not concern the West alone. What remains at stake is the possibility of arriving at a far-reaching understanding of the modern, one that cannot and will not happen without transcending the geopolitical confines of European modernity. Modernity both led and followed European troops; when the troops returned home, modernity lingered behind. If there is to be a more historically and aesthetically informed understanding of what defines the modern, this understanding is not to be found only where the ball was kicked when the project of modernity was "launched," but also where that ball landed and on the new grounds that received it.

It is therefore crucial to address some specific issues. The first is the necessity of reading literary and visual culture not merely as a conglomerate of socially representative texts, but also as "textual events" in themselves. This reading enables us to see in modern Egypt at times a clarion tension, and at others, a reconciliation between Islam and modernity. From this point of view, a broader comparison between Europe's culture of modernism and Egypt's is not entirely far-fetched. Nor is Faḍl's characterization of the unnatural speed with which it shattered the tradition of the Arabic *qaṣīda* any less of a "catastrophe" than what Frederic Jameson sees in Western modernism.[48] What he has said of European modernism – that it "dashes … traditional structures and life ways to pieces, sweeps away the sacred, undermines immemorial habits and inherited languages" – is true of

[48] Fredric Jameson, *Seeds of Time: Utopia, Modernism, Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 84.

Egyptian modernism as well. Much like Percy Bysshe Shelley's quibble with conservative theology, although he is hardly a modernist, which led to his dismissal from Oxford in 1811, Ḥusayn's philological project on pre-Islamic poetry, where he separates scriptural from historical narratives, led to his dismissal from the university in 1932, a punishment for the launch of cultural critique in modern Egypt.

Other examples of this Jamesonian shattering abound in the high art of modern Egypt; like Goethe's Faust, al-Ḥakīm's Qur'ānic protagonists lose their faith and surrender to the absurdity of human existence. In *Hams al-Junūn* (*The Whisper of Madness*) Mahfouz's madman brings the reader back to a Degree Zero of minimal reason only to take this reason away altogether and surrender to a universe of disorder and insanity, where neither God nor humanism can save the world from its own recessive genes of self-destructiveness. The text preoccupies itself with the question of insanity and its mysterious causes. However, unlike Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, which critiques the history of reason in the Age of Reason by offering a history of its opposition, namely, madness, Mahfouz's short story invites the reader to wonder how writing about madness is even possible in the first place. Thus, the specifically modernist features that mock conventional structures and de-auratize the sacred, in the Benjaminian sense of the modern function of art in a technological age of reproducibility, are clearly reflected in Egyptian narratives of the first half of the twentieth century. The characters in both al-Ḥakīm's and Mahfouz represent not only the disdainful antithesis of the most venerated pillars of holiness (reason and/versus faith), but also, and quite sardonically, the complete farcicality of human existence. The catastrophic breakdown of these protagonists is tantamount to total nihilism. Narrative burns the bridges between God and humanity, puts humankind face-to-face with a wasted earth, and tears asunder the divine contract of a promised Elysium.

Like Mahfouz's "The Whisper of Madness" and al-Ḥakīm's *The People of the Cave*, Yūsuf Idrīs's novella *Jumhūriyya-t-Faraḥāt* (*Farahat's Republic*) is a variation on the theme of the loss of faith, except this time it represents disillusionment with Nasser's socialist utopia. The text cleverly satirizes Nasserism through the character of a powerful yet uneducated police sergeant. The writing of *Farahat's Republic* coincides with a time in Egypt when Nasser's attempts to develop a welfare state had come to a critical impasse. With the birth

of the so-called "third world," social harmony did not seem far from possible, a "happy" republic (to invoke the literal Arabic meaning of Idrīs's hero, Faraḥāṭ) appeared achievable, and the Utopia the Egyptians have been dreaming of almost became a reality. Idrīs's novella dispels this utopian myth through one of the darkest satires in modern Egyptian narrative.

Such disillusionment did not, however, take place in the Egyptian film industry of the 1950s. Given the influence of the West on contemporary film, since its inception, film art has not been particularly welcome on Egyptian soil by various groups of Islamists. Even before the Muslim Brotherhood was established, numerous fundamentalist circles opposed the film industry altogether. This opposition grew out of a belief that film was anti-Islamic and damaging to Muslim sensibilities and the morality of the masses. Opposition extended to other performative arts, including theater, acting, dancing, ballet, and all art forms involving personification and characterization, especially of historical events and figures of the Islamic past. Because of the popularity of its visual representation and its clever approximation of "reality," but, more importantly because of, as Jameson puts it bluntly, the fact that film is "essentially pornographic," Islamists paid film their special attention.[49] Between 1926 and 1927, religious authorities of al-Azhar opposed the establishment of a film industry in Cairo, registering their grave concerns over the possibility of any disrespectful representations on the screen of the Prophet Muhammad or the companions of the first Muslim community.[50] In 1930, and only three years following its establishment in Cairo, *Jam'iyyat al-Shubbān al-Muslimīn* (Association of Muslim Youth) submitted an official grievance to Egypt's Prime Minister, which it also leaked to the media, objecting to a foreign film industry's plans to use Egypt as a setting for the story of the life of the Prophet

[49] In his exploration of the film industry and its surrounding culture, Fredric Jameson examines the relationship between the imaginary world of the film and the external world unto which it screened. Jameson starts his work with the powerful statement that "[T]he visual is essentially pornographic" and that "films ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body." Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

[50] See J. Swanson, *Mudhakkarāt Mu'assis Ṣinā'at al-Sinimā fī Miṣr (Memoirs of the Founder of Film Industry in Egypt)*, a collection of articles in *Dunyā al-Kawākib*, 1953–1954 (*Dunyā al-Kawākib*, Jan. 12, 1954), pp. 26–7. See also *Al-Ahrām* (Daily), Dec. 4, 1951, p. 6, and *Aakhir Sā'a*, Dec. 29, 1954, p. 16.

Muhammad and his companions.[51] Following a series of complaints, Islamic authorities in Egypt asked for stricter parliamentarian rules to censor cinematic productions and screenings of romantic films.[52] The Egyptian government was careful to censor film in order not to yield to complaints by Islamists, which would give them a say in dictating cinematic taste. But there were few occasions when the Egyptian government actually succumbed to the Muslim Brotherhood's demands to ban certain films. For instance, the short sketch *Bint al-Jirān* (*The Neighbors' Daughter*) was banned on account of using sexually suggestive language and a girl's private bedroom as the film's *mise en scène*.[53] This very tension squarely situates film at the very heart of the conflict between the sacred and the secular, and makes film a powerful vehicle of the critique of the culture of modern Egypt.

With Nasserism, Egyptian film became the object of a new form of power capable of manufacturing a whole cluster of practices and forms of knowledge under the rubric of nationalism. Chahine's eponymous film on the Algerian case of Djamila Bouhired is manipulated by a socialist regime to inculcate its message to the masses, which is itself a modern phenomenon. This visual propaganda helps define Egyptian nationalism in the 1950s through a basic reformulation of film art into a tool for the nationalist discourse. This is where a critique of visual culture narratives becomes necessary in order to situate events in the context of a larger statement of sociological, political, educational, and cultural sensibilities. Such institutional recruitment of an entire film industry in the service of the regime confirms the Foucauldian formula that history is not the result of individual ideas; it is, rather, based on discursive structures beyond subjects. This is what allows us to reconsider not only the place of visual and literary representations in relationship to Islam in modern Egypt, but also the place of Islam itself in relationship to those very representations.

While the chapters in this book juxtapose Islam to the question of modernity and modernism in Egyptian culture, the task is not to

[51] See *Majallat al-Shubbān al-Muslimīn*, Ramadān 1348 (Feb. 1930), pp. 356–7.

[52] See al-Balāgh, July 18, 1936. See L.V.V.'s summary of this demand in *Oriente Moderno* (Monthly, Rome), Vol. XVI, Sept. 1936, p. 531.

[53] See Al-Akhbār al-Jadīda, July14, 1952, p. 8. The incident was also reported in al-Miy14 (daily), July 14, p. 10. Similarly, an Egyptian documentary on the Sudan was banned after a week of screening in Cairo because it included naked scenes of local Sudanese men. See *Jérusalem Post*, Mar. 22, 1954.

argue that the culture of modern Egypt represents one particular configuration of Islam, modernity, film, fiction, and postcolonial ideologies. Indeed, investigating this complex interweaving or, to use a more accurate metaphor, this abrupt clashing of Egypt's local Islamic tradition with modernity, is a challenging project for two important reasons. First, there are controversial views on whether or not the Egyptian cultural scene assimilated or resisted the onslaught of European modernity; these contestations both inform my resistance to any monolithic Egyptian "scene" in the singular and influence my turn to diverse expressions, such as the novels and films I discuss below. The fact that all of these texts offer versions of Islam provides an important opportunity for insight into what one might call the cultural expressions of Islam in modern Egypt in the era of imperialist modernity.

The second reason, based on the first, but not entirely dependent upon it, takes us back to the question: What is an Islamic culture? How should we live (with) it? Can it be progressive and liberal, or must it be regressive and fundamentalist? Might this question itself, especially in regard to Islam, reflect a modern project based on linearity, (differential) freedom, and binary logic? When we speak, say, of the enlightened thought of Muḥammad ʻAbduh, the increasing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the polemical reification of Nasserism, the intellectual acuity of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, the novelistic genius of Naguib Mahfouz, the cinematic shrewdness of Youssef Chahine, the vocal charm of Umm Kulthūm, the political assassination of Ḥasan al-Bannā, or the radicalization of Sayyid Qutb, we are framing the discourse in a way that seems, implicitly, to refer to major events that are unique to modern Egypt. Is this uniqueness, then, a "common" trait, ironic as it seems, that could necessarily teach us something about modern Islam as an event and a postcolonial condition?

The word "event," whose Arabic equivalent "*ḥadath*" shares the same root as "modern" and "new," reminds us of yet another event: the emergence of the novel and film as new literary and visual narratives alongside the long-established genre of classical poetry. What does this supplement of *ḥadath* signify at this particular juncture in modern Egypt? There is no single, straightforward answer to this question. However, if the most important aspect of the work of art as a cultural production is "what it does not say," as Pierre Macherey

contends, then a juxtaposition of these texts, in light of both their local Islamic characteristics and their broader interactions with colonial modernity, is of critical significance for a more informed understanding of Islam and the culture of modern Egypt.[54] A reductionist probing for signs of Islam and modernism by a "faithful" examination of texts in isolation can only result in a myopic assessment, on the one hand, of the structure and value of the texts themselves and, on the other, of the importance of the arts in general for a cultural and historical understanding of the *thaqāfa* of Islam and the culture of modern Egypt.

[54] The French text reads as follows: "*ce equi est important dans une oeuvre, c'est ce qu'elle ne dit pas. Ce n'est pas la notation rapide: ce qu'elle refuse de dire.*" Pierre Macherey, *Pour Une Théorie de la Production Littérature* (François Maspero, Paris, 1966). See also Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 87.